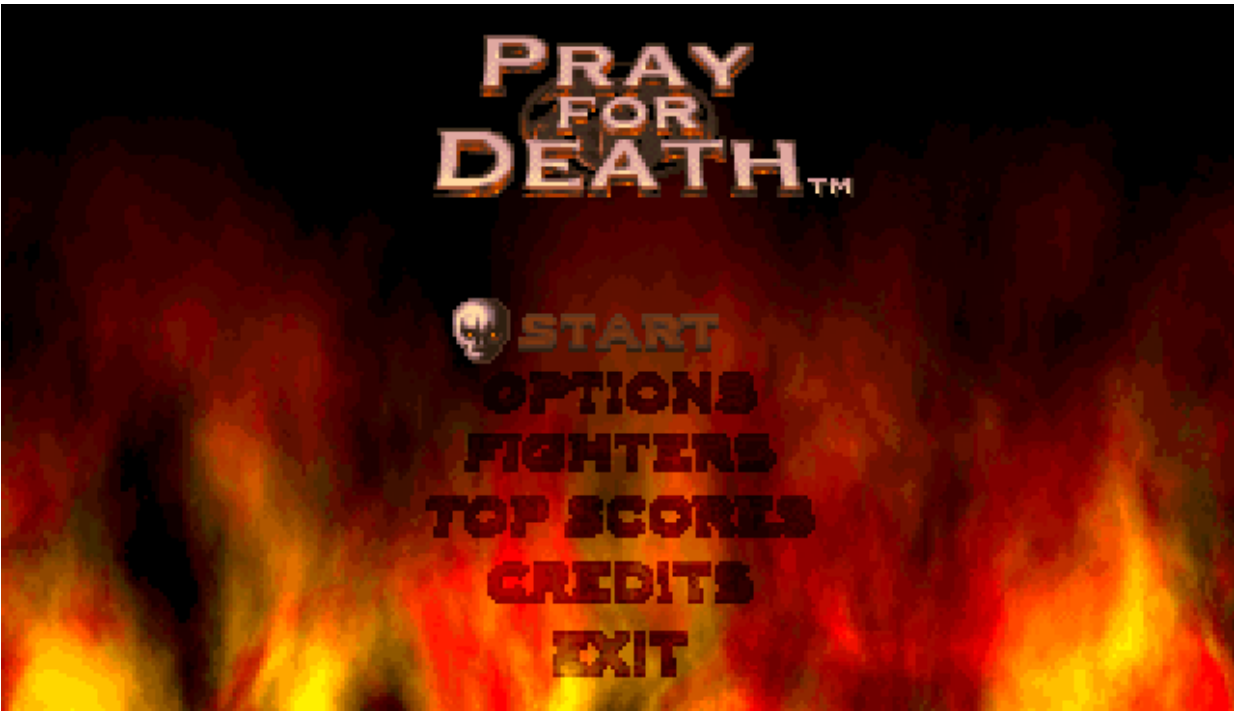


A trip down Light Shock Lane. Part 3 - Pray For Death

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

Shifting my attention to Light Shock's DOS-based fighting game, Pray for Death, I was curious to discover why it had been published by Virgin Interactive rather than Neo who took care of the distribution of each of their Amiga titles. Francesco informed me it wasn't that the relationship had broken down in some way, only that "Neo did not have a big presence in the PC market across Europe". It makes a refreshing change that 'artistic differences' hadn't come into play as is often the case where such fragile alliances are concerned.



Pray For Death revolves around everyone's favourite lovable rogue, Death, who to keep himself amused has arranged the mother of all sparring tournaments in the underworld.

Amongst the decuple of 2D-rendered inhabitants littering this afterlife purgatory are H.P. Lovecraft's green-blooded Cthulhu "from another dimension", a hellish succubus, scantily clad "expelled from heaven" renegade angel, schizophrenic serial-killing dominatrix ex-rock star and a Bruce Lee wannabe known as Jan Fun. Appropriately, Jan Fun "died in 1973 under mysterious circumstances".

Each of them is graciously dispatched with their own biography to shed light on the deep-seated aspirations they desperately yearn to fulfil following their rebirth, the realisation of which can only be granted by Death should they be triumphant in defeating him. These desires function as the driving force compelling them to fight.



"There are 12 fighters in all, and in the grand tradition of fighting games, they are a pretty weird bunch who wouldn't look out of place at a high society fancy dress do. There's robots, Bruce Lee lookalikes, swamp creatures... something for everybody, in fact (unless you've always harboured a secret desire to lead Thora Hird into battle, that is)."

Charlie Brooker takes a sneak peek at an early preview copy for PC Zone in issue 38. Yes, the dark-witted producer and presenter of the 'wipe' shows and Black Mirror series spent a portion of his early career as a games journalist.



Light Shock were at one point in discussions with Sony who were keen to publish the game and oversee its transition to the PlayStation (later known as the PSOne). The team felt the technical limitations of the console (1mb versus 16mb of RAM), in addition to their lack of experience with the platform and narrow four-month time frame allotted to the port would have curtailed Pray for Death's development. Instead they chose to accept an alternative offer from Virgin who released it only for the PC.

To learn how this netherworldly Battle Royale evolved from a twinkle in Death's eye to a shrink-wrapped boxed game sitting on the shelves of entertainment retailers around the globe, I contacted former game designing lynchpin, Sebastiano Del Gobbo.

"First of all, I have to say that ours was an independent company based in Porto San Giorgio and named "Vysio Arte Elettronica". It was composed by 4 members (in

alphabetical order): Carlo Gioventu, Mauro Alessandrini, Sebastiano Del Gobbo, Valentino Eugeni.

We developed 90% of the game "Pray for death". Lightshock software sold the game to Virgin and helped us (a lot) to improve the overall game experience, optimize some parts of the code and define some aspects of the main story.

It was the age of the "beat 'em up" games: Street Fighter, Mortal Kombat, Tekken and Killer Instinct. We were inspired by the last one: we really loved KI and it was quite a game-changer. There was no game like KI for PC, and we thought it could be a good idea to develop one.

So we started to work to the main story and to the background of the characters (the fighters).

At the same time, we worked to gameplay, characters and "battlefields" design.

We wanted to involve some characters inspired by various fields: fantasy, sci-fi, horror, religion, real life, etc... We wanted the characters to have something important to fight for... Back to life. We imagined that only Death has this power so Death is the final "boss" to defeat.

It was an extremely low budget project: actually we worked for months (it took about a year) without pay.

Talking about the tools... We used 3 Amiga A4000s for the production of all the images (battlefields, characters and videos) and a PC for coding.

We modelled and rendered the characters using Lightwave 3D, modelled and rendered the battlefield

using Real3D. The code was developed using The Programmer Workbench and Watcom C Compiler. Due to the tools available and the number of people involved, it was extremely challenging to reach the goal.

I remember the joy when we knew that Lightshock sold the game to Virgin and the endless satisfaction the day the game was finished. We were also very proud to read the articles in magazines talking about us and our game. Good times! :-)

When I go back to those times, I think we were young, enthusiastic, without experience and, for some aspects, naive. So, when it comes to make a point, taking into consideration our effort and the money we gained, we were very disappointed.

Some of us needed to gain money to live and so we decided to take different paths. Some of us wanted to try again and work on a new game, but others (like me) wanted to do something different, less interesting and challenging but more "pragmatic".

I have no regrets. It was a fantastic experience: I did something challenging and fun at the same time, I met new friends and I am very proud of what we did. Still today, people are quite impressed when I tell them I worked on a videogame sold all over the world and some of them still remember it. Of course things could be different but it doesn't matter now."



A 15 man crew (plus Virgin's supporting production staff) toiled day and night to see the project through to completion, in the process devising their own video compression system to ensure the animation remained seamlessly fluid throughout. Using several PC workstations and an Amiga 4000 equipped with a Cyberstorm accelerator card, they were able to model and render the entirety of the character set and backdrop Lightwave sequences, in addition to simulating realistic motion parallax.

Seemingly the transition to the PC platform with the backing of a globally recognised publisher marked a seismic shift in the structure and magnitude of the production personnel. Was that a help or a hindrance?, I enquired.

"If you refer the full credits for Pray for Death is mainly due to Virgin part. Big companies add always a LOT of people to credits that maybe are "involved" in the marketing or other internal stuff. Practically we were in

direct contact with the producer and the lead tester. Compare the names in the intro with the credits to have the difference, in the intro is cited almost just the team."

Programmer, Marco Biondi

Marco is credited as being responsible for 'supervising' the Fightin' Spirit and Black Viper projects, and also for providing 'additional coding' with regards to Pray for Death. While I had him on the line, so to speak, I snagged the opportunity to ascertain precisely what these titles alluded to.

"I was involved in different tasks, on the credits we adopted the rule to cite each name just one time to avoid discussions on "ego" ;)

As programmer:

- I was in charge of a lot of internal tools on Amiga to support the graphics workflows (even for games that were targeting the PC) like the sprite palette variants or the trimming and optimization of the raw graphic frames.

- I made the "AI" automata for Fightin Spirit and the part that was supporting the CD32 platform (audio and joystick) - I helped in making the compression algorithm for Pray intro (a real nightmare! Kudos to Matteo!!!) and the opponents' AI.

- On Black Viper I have done some marginal help and a lot of tuning on the gameplay.

At a certain point I was the best English speaker of the main office so I started to keep the contacts (mainly on phone) with our foreign distributors becoming de facto the "in house" producer of the games. I remember the 3-

meter faxes from Virgin during the beta test phases of Pray For Death.

Analyzing all the reported issues in the correct priority order and sort them out to all the people involved was quite hard! I still remember the weirdest report: "if you pause the game after two hours it will crash". I manage also to find where it was but it took a really long time :P"



Another key member of the Pray for Death contingent is Carlo Gioventu, who is acclaimed for his contribution to the project's design, story and character design. Luckily for us he was on hand and also happy to break down his involvement, fleshing out my bony knowledge.

"Pray for Death was developed by me and Valentino Eugeni, Mauro Alessandrini and Sebastiano del Gobbo, don't remember the exact date, around 94. It took around 18 months of development and we started it from

scratch three times :D because we changed c++ as watcom released new c platform that enabled extended memory. On the end of development we considered to start it over the 4th time to do it in hi-res (640x480) but Virgin Interactive would kill us :)

I was the creator and animator of the character, Valentino was the only programmer, Sebastiano and Mauro worked on the backgrounds. Music was made by Paolo Bragaglia, sound effects by Nicola Tomlianovich. I did the interface and menu graphics, but guy from Light Shock did the final versions because they were more skilled on 2D. Light Shock provided code and tools for video and audio compression for the movies.

We were inspired by Killer Instinct and Darkstalkers, and decided to do a beat 'em up game for the PC, as then there was none. All beat 'em up were done mainly for Neo Geo.

When we was working on Pray we've seen "Rise of the Robots" a blockbuster beat 'em up, and was on development under "big money", so we truly feared for the destiny of our game. When we've seen it we realised that it would be no obstacle for us. It was truly a badly done game. We won Golden Joystick as best beat 'em up of the year for PC.

We've sold 30.000 copies in only one week. After that no more copies were sold because of a very bad contract done by Light Shock with Virgin Interactive. No more copies were published. I personally think that Virgin made back all the money invested in Pray for Death with the copies printed. At the time they were oriented in advertising their expensive projects like Broken Sword. After this we left Light Shock and our group parted."

Naturally, grilling one of the chief developers behind the character design, I couldn't let Carlo go without first asking him about the one in particular people remember most fondly, above any other aspect of the game... Cthulhu!

"Cthulhu was one of the first characters that we decided to put in as we decided that the game scenario would be afterlife, and obviously he was the favourite of all the team. It was hard to keep him levelled as other characters. :D"

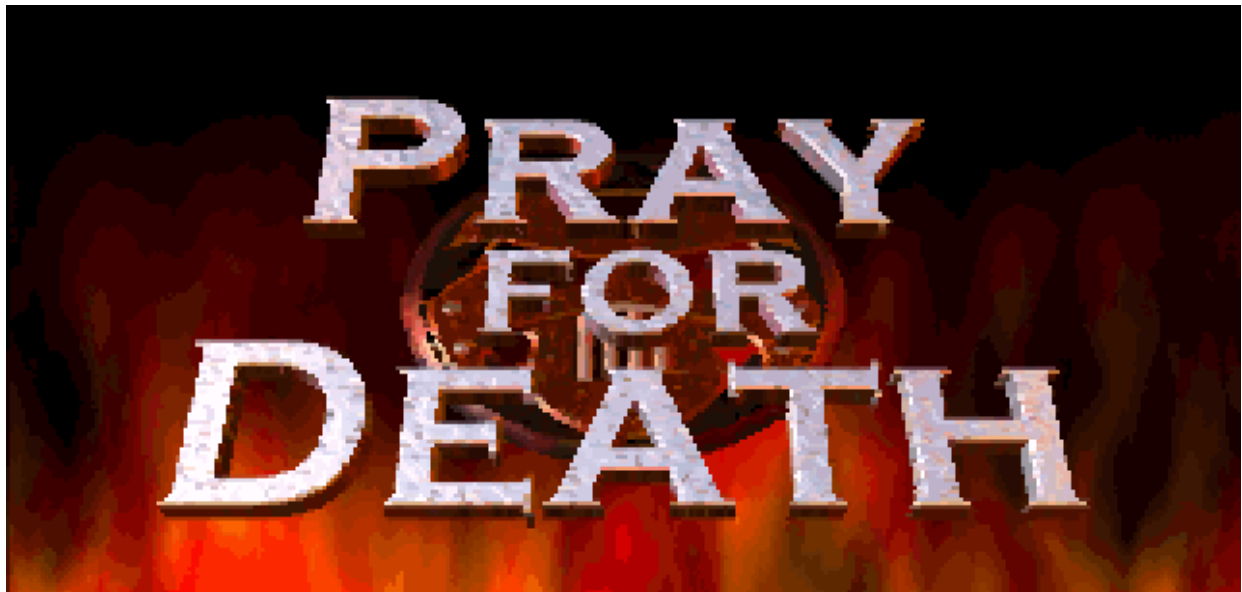


Time hasn't been too kind to the 30 fps, pseudo-3D visuals, as you might expect. Nonetheless, turning off the hindsight goggles momentarily, we can see that they're at least on par with Pray for Death's most tenacious rivals (Super Street Fighter II, Mortal Kombat III, FX Fighter, Virtua Fighter Remix), and the imaginative use of pyrotechnic light sourcing, shading and looped FMV backdrops in particular is to be commended. It's also worth bearing in mind that the cheery

slugfest was a *budget* title, a category in which it won an award in the year of its release.

"...on the graphics front Pray for Death fares quite well, with some impressive scenery and well-implemented water effects, although I did notice that the backgrounds tended to shift slightly in time with the movement of the characters. For what it's worth (and it's not much), the intro is beautiful."

Paul Ditta, PC Zone issue 41



Substance isn't the soundtrack's forte, taking a back seat to the unfaltering, combative sound effects and digitised taunts and boasts. Somewhat anaemic, perhaps representing the barren wasteland of the 'other side', it at least instils an unnerving and enigmatic sense of foreboding. The cathedral amphitheatre marks the acoustic highlight given it's perfectly equipped to deliver single-pitch pipe organ music with a church bell accompaniment invoking the notion of overbearing, gothic ritual.

The Killer Instinct-esque action runs smoothly enough and with a host of diverse arenas in which to brawl, camera panning, digitised speech (and hypnotic chanting!), combos, combo breakers, quirky comedic fatality and special moves aplenty, it ticks many of the right boxes.

Regrettably, it was released into a beat-'em-up milieu already awash with fierce competition and so struggled to gain traction. It received mediocre to above-average critical assessment, though failed to truly set the DOS world ablaze.

"I didn't hate Pray For Death by any stretch of the imagination, but at the end of the day most of us have limited funds, and if you want a cracking beat 'em up there are better titles on offer. If, however, the mere mention of 'beat 'em up' has you thrashing around in a pool of your own juice then give it a go - but don't say we didn't warn you."

Paul Ditta sums up his 70% review, PC Zone issue 41

